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Review: On Fire

“The ecstasy of resistance”

Anarcho

April 28, 2009

On Fire: *The Battle of Genoa and the anti-capitalist movement*
(One-Off Press: ISBN 1 902593 54 5)

This is an excellent book. It contains sixteen eye-witness accounts and analyses of the protests at Genoa earlier this year. All shades of opinion within the libertarian wing of anti-capitalist movement are contained in it and so it is a diverse but always interesting (and at times, moving) account of ordinary people doing extra-ordinary things in difficult circumstances. That is in itself enough to recommend it. These are the accounts of the people who want to make history rather than the interpretations of journalists (mainstream or so-called “revolutionary”) and the specialists in ideology (again, mainstream or “revolutionary”). As such, the accounts of those involved in the Black Block should be read by all. Combined with the personal accounts is some excellent political analysis. All in all, a wonderful account and analysis of what contributor calls “the ecstasy of resistance.”

Needless to say, it will be impossible to cover all the issues raised, never mind all the lessons that can be gained from these accounts.

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I would suggest that the following can be considered among the most important.

Firstly, the need to (to use Jazz's words) get "out into workplaces and communities, getting beyond the narrow activist base and its marginalised periphery... Politics has to be made real to everyday life ... and not just dependent on six monthly spectaculars for a political fix." Only once the movement has strengthened its links it has been building with working class struggle and life can we actually start to transform society for the better. Until then, events like Genoa may inspire by they will never transform (as participants are aware, of course. As one says, "we were not in Genoa to destroy capitalism, so that kind of criticism misses the point. What happened in Genoa was a generalised riot, not an anti-capitalist insurrection." In Genoa, many (most?) Italian anarchists (including the two national federations) worked with the base unions (COBAS) and striking workers and marched with them. The way RTS and other groups here are linking up with workers in struggle is the way forward.

Secondly, the need for organisation comes through clearly from the accounts. While, of course, organisation is generated spontaneously through struggle, it means reinventing the wheel every time there is a demo (and, of course, it does not address what we do between demos). As such, Massimo de Angelis makes a valid (and extremely old anarchist point) when he argues that "not even the slogan on T-shirts in Genoa was entirely correct: another world is not only possible. Rather, we are already patiently and with effort building another world — with all its contradictions, limitations and ambiguities — through the form of our networks." This clearly ties in the first point. We do have to build the new world in the shell of the old is we want to end capitalism.

Thirdly, communication between activists is essential. As numerous contributors argue, by (for example) Black Blockers and pacifists talking to each other then there will be less likelihood that the cops and media can use splitting tactics. As Starhawk put it, we

“have to communicate. We can no longer afford to wage parallel but disconnected struggles at the same demonstrations. We need to clearly state our intentions and goals for each action, and ask others to support them.” But, as she stresses, “agreements are only agreements when everyone participates in making them.” As such equality, solidarity and respect are essential and that, of course, flows naturally from point two (the need to build the new world, as far as possible, today in our struggles). It may be difficult, but it is essential.

Fourthly, the question of police violence in Genoa. As one contributor argues, the “police could carry out such a brutal act openly ... means that they do not expect to be held accountable for their actions. Which means that they had support from higher up, more powerful politicians ... That those politicians also do not expect to be condemned ... means that they too have support from higher up, ultimately, from Berlusconi ... That Berlusconi could support such acts means that he must be certain of support from other international powers” (Brian S). As Starhawk rightly puts it, blaming the Black Block misses the point (as the State wants). The Black Block was “not the source of the problem in Genoa. The problem was state, police and Fascist violence.” In Genoa “we encountered a carefully orchestrated political campaign of state terrorism.” The police planned to attack the march and by blaming the Black Block (as liberals and trots have done) has effectively let the state off the hook.

Fifthly, the book helps others to understand those who take part in the Black Block tactic. It clearly shows that the Block in Genoa was not exclusively anarchist and that its roots lie in the German Autonomists and not anarchism as such. It also allows its participants to refute some of the charges against them (such as being “elitist,” being “responsible” for the police violence, being police agents and so on). As such, it helps to push the debate on tactics forward by allowing people to understand where others are coming from.

Lastly, the importance of (in Starhawk's words) "staying on the streets." The very fact the state went to such lengths to attack the anti-globalisation demonstrations (and to split the movement) shows that we are a threat to the status quo. While the leaders of the world may like to dismiss it as "an anarchist travelling circus" the fact is that these demos, regardless of their limitations, do show that people are resisting and that there is an alternative to capitalism. Particularly in these days of war, we must stay on the streets and show that there is only one war worth fighting — the class war.

This book is, it is to be hoped, the start of a process in which we can discuss our ideas, our tactics, our movement and actions. We are clearly considered as a threat, hence the attempts to spilt the movement along the lines of "violence" and "non-violence" by the state (although, as Starhawk says, "if breaking windows and fighting back when the cops attack is 'violence,' then give me a new word, a word a thousand times stronger, to use when the cops are beating non-resisting people into comas."). We cannot let them succeed, particular as the events in Genoa show that state violence was pre-planned and would have occurred even if the Black Block did not exist.

Ultimately, in order to build a militant anti-capitalist movement we need to make it relevant to the class who keep the global system going by its labour and which has the power to end it. The class which most anarchists are members of, the working class. This may well be a harder task than participating in a Black Block at demonstrations but until every workplace, community and school is a black block in terms of militancy, solidarity and politics an alternative to capitalism will never be on the cards.

Dare to dream, yes, but also dare to put that dream into practice!